

The Poetry Quality in Robert Louis Stevenson's Essays

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ABSTRACT

Few articles have talked about the poetry quality in essays, and the paper is in an attempt to analyze the poetic quality of Stevenson's essays in the form, subjectivity, and cultural aspect. In the hollowness of a materialized world, the poetry quality is shelter to the human spirit and the ultimate existence of human beings.

Keywords: the poetry quality; essays; Stevenson.

INTRODUCTION

Essay is hard to categorize, while it is a short literary form to convey a writer's consideration on certain topics, without being too formal nor too excursive. Essay is defined as any short composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject, or simply entertain. The essay differs from a "treatise" or "dissertation" in its lack of pretension to be a systematic and complete exposition, and in being addressed to a general rather than a specialized audience.^[1]

Few articles have discussed of Stevenson's essays, which has been expressing a poetic(诗性) view of human life. The Glossary of Literary Term has given such a comment, "This was the age when William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, Charles Lamb, and, later in the nineteenth century, Robert Louis Stevenson brought the English essay--and especially the personal essay--to a level that has not been surpassed."(p. 103, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*) Readers are familiar with Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* and poems but his essays are of poetic value, paled by the achievement of his novel *Treasure Island*. Stevenson's father was an engineer who had built many lighthouses around the rocky coast of Scotland and it was out of his father's hope that Stevenson studied engineering but he published his first essay, "Roads", as a sign of rebellion against his father's wish. The behavior has already been misted with a romantic and adventurous spirit, then the essays will embody the somewhat poetic spirit.

The poetry quality in recent years has been regaining popularity against the bustling of the world in which materials dominate. In opposition to pragmatism, the poetry quality stands for the experience or sensation for a peaceful mind and metaphysical experience larger than what language could ever express. The related phrase of poetry quality, the poetic wisdom, is first put forward in *The New Science*(1725) by Vico(1668-1744), but there is still dispute over the definition of the poetry quality. Vico put up with the term "poetic wisdom" against the holistic atmosphere of superior reasoning, because "metaphysics is the sublime science". "Since the first men of the gentile world had the simplicity of children, who are truthful by nature, the first fables could not feign anything false; they must therefore have been, as they have been defined above, true narrations."^[ii] That is to say the first men of the gentile world share such an organic and pure feeling of the world, a sense-oriented one where the poetry quality nourish the mind. The poetry quality by nature is undescrivable indeed through the technique of language, which could only be caught traces of instead of being materialized. However, the poetry quality is based on human beings, a reconstruction of the world and the self by means of human creation, which develops to be such an aesthetic category that contains all the Essential of human beings. Furthermore, the poetry quality is not poem, neither is it the process of poeticizing; the poetry quality puts emphasis on the essential aesthetic implication and the abstract nature of an artist work instead of the specific pattern or

technique.^[iii] However, it is true that the poetry quality is expressed by means of language, style, sound and the elements that make one feel and sense a metaphysical existence and further sense the meaning of the abstract existence.

Stevenson's *Essays of Travel*^[iv] has presented such an poetic travel experience which is valuable and self-reflective in the bustling world. Stevenson depicts nature scene at variegated places, then the further understanding of the relation between people and nature as a whole. The three aspects have in return formed part of the poetry quality of the essays. The paper is in such an attempt to give readings of Stevenson's essays in several aspects of the poetry quality, the form level, the sense level and the culture level.

1. The Expression of Form of Poetry Quality

Zhang Shiyang has pointed out that language has such a feature that the untold could be inferred from the told, which could be called the poetic quality of language. Language itself is a form of poetic quality.^[v] Stevenson's writing has presented such features that the words could form into the picturesque. Through the description, the scene before Stevenson unfolds vividly into readers' minds as the essay goes on. The choice of how to connect the personal experience with language shows the excellency of Stevenson's writing skills, as he says in his *Essays in the Art of Writing* that "all our arts and occupations lie wholly on the surface; it is on the surface that we perceive their beauty, fitness, and significance.[...] Those disclosures which seem fatal to the dignity of art seem so perhaps only in the proportion of our ignorance."^[vi] This citation is to emphasize on the organic construction of the form that shows utmost importance to the aesthetic value of a piece of work. Stevenson emphasizes the surface form of aesthetic sensation which is a holistic part of the poetry quality. To deepen the understanding of the beauty and learn how to master the "detail of method" is to destroy the work and its aesthetic value. However, the effort to enjoy the form should be placed to better know the poetic value the form carries. As one of Stevenson's essay *Walking Tours* expresses,

"We fall in love, we drink hard, we run to and fro upon the earth like frightened sheep. And now you are to ask yourself if, when all is done, you would not have been better to sit by the fire at home, and be happy thinking. To sit still and contemplate, – to remember the faces of women without desire, to be pleased by the great deeds of men without envy, to be everything and everywhere in sympathy, and yet content to remain where and what you are – is not this to know both wisdom and virtue, and to dwell with happiness?"^[vii]

G. K. Chesterton says of Stevenson that he "seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins."^[viii] The essays reflect a certain poetic taste through language itself. Within the short

paragraph, Stevenson omits the surplus information, directly giving the whole picture of the company. The surface of the information not only gives happiness detailed affairs, but attitudes towards those who know not happiness. The poetic reading should be transmitted from the superficial talking of being content into the existential value of the individuals themselves. The implication in the poetic existence share the similar living aestheticism as Shakespeare says in *Othello*, "Poor and content is rich and rich enough."^[ix](p. 2120, *Complete Works*) The tradition of Shakespearean thinking is carried as the aesthetic value of the individual living.

Yet, the paragraph has shown more poetic thinking than a quick reading. "When all is done", the "all" refers to the lifespan of one person. "Falling" is a process of life circle. "Love" also signifies not only an emotional feeling, but the matters, the people or the things that one has been attracted and holds dear to. When one has entered the circle of falling, his prime of all is on the decline towards doom be it once being honour, career, or physical youth. The process of one's growing old metaphorically means the end of glory, the walking stop of a senior life. When Stevenson says, "We run to and fro upon the earth like frightened sheep", the urge to maintaining a living is like running to and fro for the exchange of the necessary or extra substance for living. Under the pressure of existence, people are engaged in the activities for respective gaining. However, people are merely sheep that are given God's punishment in the Bible, as Philip states that "rams and goats are the compound targets of God's wrath toward and punishment of the Babylonians."^[x] In this theological aspect, "we" refers to all the bearers who are cast upon the wrath of God and the running for a living is merely paying cost of the angst of God. "We" must run to and fro to cease the heavenly angst. His belonging to a flowering world ultimately returns to the dust while the physical materials or spiritual requirement has finally been defeated by the lasting silence. Desire, envy and other feelings have lost meaning compared with sympathy, content, the ultimate goodness of a poetic living. *Walking Tours* is indeed beautiful in its language and the implication it conveys.

2. The Subject Sensibility of Poetry Quality

Sensibility takes an irreplaceable role in the construction of poetry quality. The process of feeling, hearing, seeing, touching, performing, etc., has determinant influences on translating the objective or subjective existence into the origin of specific aspects of poetry quality. The sound may come first in sensing the poetic quality. As Stevenson says, "Music and literature, the two temporal arts, contrive their pattern of sounds in time; or, in other words, of sounds and pauses. [...] The true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself; so that each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot, and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself."^[xi](p. 3, *Essays in the Art of Writing*) Therefore, the style of essays

embody the musical feature in the process of reading, a direct sense of the poetic quality. And to better understand the poetic quality, an association with Stevenson's education experience is necessary.

Stevenson suffered from a chronic health problems during his childhood, and had to lie on bed. His nurse Allison Cunningham exerted a very strong influence on him by reading *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Old Testament*, which were his direct literary enlightenment at this time. Later he went to Edinburgh University against his will of literary ambitions, but his achievement on literary won. To understand his living environment, the two Edinburghs, he was modeled by them, one being respectable deeply religious and polite and the other being bohemian and shady.^[xvi] The juxtaposition of the two aspects strengthened his fascination with the duality of human nature.^[xvii] Later he traveled to France, America and finally the South Seas, profound in his lifetime. His insight to himself, the duality of human life and the world gives varied senses, experiences and different touches to his work. The travel essays are his travels in literature and are melted with his understanding in sensibility.

Stevenson's essays start with his amateur emigrant life. Experience comes first with his independence after he joined the emigration. It should be noted that Stevenson is constrained by his financial dependence on his father.(p. 969, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*) Life on the ship has enables the writer to make use of his sense to see, hear, and experience as much as possible with little limitation of the outside world. The freedom is gained out of being confined to bed at childhood. The adventure life is close to nature or returning to nature in which Stevenson depicts in close detail of the real world. Vico says that "poetic speech, in virtue of the poetic characters it employs, can yield many discoveries concerning antiquity."(p. 119) Stevenson as an individual subject applies his skilled technique to the lines to such an extent of making what he feels free to.

"Wind" is such an image. "The wind, too, made himself of the party, brought the colour into their faces, and gave them enough to do to repress their drapery; and one of them, amid much giggling, had to pirouette round upon her toes(as girls do) when some specially strong gust had got the advantage over her."(p. 96, *Essays of Travel*) The scene starts with the participation of wind, and, out of the employment of personification, wind has been given life to play a part. The wind is not only naturally generated, but as an "uninvited guest" to amuse the party. The wind plays with the crowd and highlights one of the members, like dancing with a girl. The refined description of the wind is a reflection of Stevenson, whose aesthetic trend to a tiny behavior shows the ultimate taste of the goodness in nature. The "wind" appears in the book as many as 60 times, which has rendered the whole passage a sense of wind-blowing effect. This element is not see-able but it could bring the sensibility to an in-depth level that uplifts and

guides the sensibility. "Wind freshened", "wind hauled ahead", "wind passed", "wind bursts", "wind cunningly winds", "the wind hiss vainly", "the wind was quite local", etc., the above descriptions of wind have made it full as a human being. So to speak, Stevenson is playing with wind, through the sounds, the tricks, the sensibilities wind makes, and catches the different aspects of wind to express his fondness of wind. The catching of the transient beauty makes the harmonious sight revive whenever the lines are read, to have completed the eternity. The poetic quality is reached through the refined accomplishment of description, originated from the eloquent soft mood of Stevenson. "We expose our mind to the landscape (as we would expose the prepared plate in the camera) for the moment only during which the effect endures; and we are away before the effect can change."(p.98, *Essays of Travel*)

The individual sensibility of the scene resembles that of a child who seeks what needs not be paid and plays with all heart and observes the beauty that is not wide spread valued. Then the musical effect is partly demonstrated by the movement of winds and partly by Stevenson's choice of words and the way to describe the movement. It is necessary to feel the poetic quality with subjectivity, an quality shared by those with or near a similar view of the value of aesthetic judgment. The return to sensibility is to return to the antique of the human beings' interaction with nature out of the need for dialogue with nature. Such point of view is already there as Zhang Weidong states "the feature of poetry quality is against the historic quality, the scientific quality and the logic quality.[...] The poetry quality is generally in accordance with sensibility, imagination and rhythm."^[xviii]

Stevenson's choice of pauses of sentences are in accordance with his own words that "each phrase, besides, is to be comely in itself; and between the implication and the evolution of the sentence there should be a satisfying equipoise of sound; for nothing more often disappoints the ear than a sentence solemnly and sonorously prepared."(p. 3, *Essays in the Art of Writing*) Take several parts as proofs, "It is true, however, that most men do not possess the faculty of free action, the priceless gift of being able to live for the moment only; and as they begin to go forward on their journey, they will find that they have made for themselves new fetters."(p. 99, *Essays of Travel*) The sentence presents a balanced structure, first a knot "free action" being set, then the knot being cleared by the start of another knot, "new fetters". "Out of unknown thickets comes forth the soft, secret, aromatic odour of the woods, not like a smell of the free heaven, but as though court ladies, who had known these paths in ages long gone by, still walked in the summer evenings, and shed from their brocades a breath of musk or bergamot upon the woodland winds." The rhythm "s", the rich use of plural form "s" and the similar consonant "th"/(/θ/), alliteration "woodland winds" make the sentence extremely rhythmic when

being read aloud. Also the sentence ushers in association with Byron's poem, "She Walks in Beauty"^[xiv], an intertextuality of literary text. The refined taste and adventurous imagination of Stevenson makes the subjectivity a peak. The short and long sentences make the paragraphs a piece of music and the implication is rich in content. Therefore, the poetry quality is just there to be felt.

The combination of the individuality and the spirit has been harmonious in the essay. Nature in other words is poetic. Stevenson's emigration is in nature and out of the writer's will, a success for the writer himself. The closeness to nature and to people around him have made him to depict the equality, esteem of human beings. Stevenson has a most peaceful tone to write in his manner, specifically and equally, the fineness and evil of human beings. In the eyes of Heidegger, the ontology of art is poem, and poem is considered as thinking instead of the ordinary poems.^[xv] Actually the chores of life are Stevenson's but they are also ours; the majority of the people are living in chores, in which the pleasure and the angers are generated but the ways to control temper are showing another poetic implication, that is the weakness of human nature. The essays have examined the spirit and the variety of human nature, reflecting the esteem of human nature and the power of thinking. "They were just high enough up in the social order not to be afraid to speak to a gentlemen; and just low enough to feel a little tremor, a nervous consciousness of wrong-doing--of stolen waters, [...]" (p. 96, *Essays of Travel*) Stevenson's acute insight into the social order and human mind proves his sensibility in the fluctuation of mood, the caring of others' intricate sense. The insight and the effort to remain a gentle style mark the essay with poetic thinking and poetic wisdom of the essayist.

3. The Cultural Aspect of Poetry Quality

Apart from Stevenson's personal poetic pursuit, the social background is closely related to his writing. At the time of the writing, the two Industrial Revolutions have made great changes to the world. Stevenson has been greatly influenced by the revolutions. He inherited a tendency to coughs and fevers (bronchial problems) so that he has to search for a place suitable for his state of health. Some of his best essays are also written during his travel overseas. The essays have given different description of the places he travels to. To be distant from his home gives him a chance to view his culture in different situation. When Stevenson was shortly living on various islands of the South Seas, he gradually recovered his health and got himself closer to the attractions of literary fields. The Victorian Age is a period of expansion, reaching to every inch of the planet and colonizing as planned. The human beings have created culture, and are formed by culture they have created. The industrial revolutions have been brought up and greatly influenced the human life, urging the expansion of capitals. The revolution offers Stevenson such convenient ways of traveling, and the travel has made him realize the cruelty of the industrial

expansion, the oppression on the colony. As the Britain became the dominant power in the period, Stevenson witnessed the duality of human nature.

"In 1888, Stevenson had set out with his family entourage for the South Seas, becoming a legend in his lifetime. He visited the leper colony at Molokai, which inspired his celebrated defence of Father Damien (1841-1889), the Belgian priest who had devoted his life to caring for 700 neglected lepers." (p. 970, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*) However, upon the philanthropic influence of the Father, he could not hide but state the Father is dual in human nature, instead of misleading readers to follow the Catholic schooling. "He was not a pure man in his relations with women, and the leprosy of which he died should be attributed to his vices and carelessness."^[xvi] The dual aspects of Father Damien contribute to the double poetic aspect of an individual, and the same goes true to the entire Victorian age. The beneficial effect of the Age has to a great extent boosted the growth of man-oriented products and human experience, while the deteriorating effect on human nature has never been underestimated.

As the inner motivation of the expansion has a huge impact on the whole society, the ushering of utility is an inevitable consequence of the Industrial Revolution, a focus on the economic efficiency and the discard of humanistic caring. As Jeremy Bentham puts up with Utilitarianism that "by exemption from pains--from particular pains, the happiness of all will be augmented by the all-beneficent means there proposed,"^[xvii] the utility of the society has been given the theoretical basis for the superficiality. "The establishment of romantic poetry and the value of children, however, had also been gaining importance in that childhood carried purity, imagination and sensibility, values that were sublimated up to the worship of freedom and the return of the purity of human nature."^[xviii] Being influenced by the duality of the holistic social atmosphere, Stevenson on one hand find shelter to criticize the society under the coverage of children literary work and on the other tries to talk over the middle class to slow down the pace. "We are in such a haste to be doing, to be writing, to be gathering gear, to make our voices audible a moment in the derisive silence of eternity, that we forget that one thing, of which these are but parts-- namely to live!" (p. 413, *Walking Tours*) The growth of wealth in the Victorian Age has in many ways forced people to think of the bareness of the spiritual world, the inner experience of the individuality. Stevenson thus tries to evoke the exploration of inner world and through the sensibility and seeing the world, so that the poetry quality may fill the emptiness and fight against both the poverty and the richness that has caused the vices of human nature. And finally through the search of the poetry quality the virtues of human nature could prevail. Stevenson's achievement in essays is huge and though paled by his success in children novel. To a large extent, the neglect of Stevenson is due to Virginia

Woolf, "Condemned by literary figures such as Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard, he was gradually excluded from the canon of literature taught in schools."^[xix] However, the poetry quality from the social aspect in Stevenson's essay is no more obvious, against the background of the superficiality flow in the Age.

"This man was calm; he had attained prosperity and ease; he disapproved the policy which had been pursued by labour from end to end."(p. 50, *Essays of Travel*) Throughout the entire book, *Essays of Travel*, the word "society" is not found, but the individual sensibility is everywhere else in the collection of essays. Nature and the human thinking are combined to produce such poetry quality. *Road* has presented the writer's wisdom on choice. The road is not only the material one to step on, but metaphorically ministers the choice one makes. "It is to this wandering and uneasy spirit of anticipation that roads minister."(p. 212, *Essay of Travel*) The roads actually refer to the life the writer has chosen. After long journeys, the road leads to his home and also signifies his final destination, a poetic way of passing days.

CONCLUSION

The paper discusses three aspects of the poetry in Stevenson's essays thinking the essays are most valuable in that they are not merely talking of the reasons or just the life. The poetry quality could be sensed through form, the language the essays have presented being natural, picturesque, and musical. The features form the direct sense of the poetry. With the author's skilled technique of writing and the subject experience, the aesthetic value of the essays could be experienced in a similar way. However, the poetry quality is vital to the sustainable and healthy spiritual world, the savior to the human existence. In this respect, the essays are close to the Zen in its aesthetic and existential value and also in the value of making one feel about life, to live.

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